

May 21, 2002

On July 24th, 2001, Frank Viola was invited to speak to a group of 30 elders who were overseeing more than 10 congregations in Santiago, Chile. The one-day meeting began at 10:30 am and ended at 6:30 pm.

In many ways, what took place was very similar to a historical church council. Frank was asked to present his views on church leadership and to share whatever was on his heart with the men present. Rudi Lopez, a brother in one of the churches that Frank planted (in Brandon, Florida), translated the message into Spanish. (Rudi has written an entire account of Frank's Chile trip and the details of this meeting.) The elders only allowed five people who were not church leaders to attend this conference. After the day was finished, the five made these incisive remarks: "These men have never been spoken to like this before in their lives." "For 12 years we and many others in the churches they oversee have been controlled and oppressed. Today we felt we were being set free." One man who heard the message live likened it to two bombshells dropped on the elders' playground: Nagasaki and Hiroshima!

With only a New Testament in hand and without the use of any notes, Frank delivered the following message. With only slight editing, what follows is the complete transcript. 95% of the text is the verbatim message. Therefore, it reads just as it was spoken.

OPENING WORDS

Well brothers, I'm thrilled to be here, and I want to thank you for having me come. The first thing I want to say is that I am very impressed seeing this many men, leaders, sitting in a room together. Knowing that you have a history of fellowshiping together and seeking to work together at some level can only be a work of God. This is very impressive. So I thank you brothers for doing what you are doing. I am blessed. If I left the room right now, I would be blessed.

This young man to my left is the brother that is trying to translate. (Laughter.) Let me tell you how he got here. And this is my introduction of this brother. The church that sent me here has a phone book. It contains the names of all of the Spanish translators in the United States. It begins with the best translators. We began to call those gentlemen, but none of them could come. So we continued on down through the pages of this book to those translators who are not as good. We called all of them. We asked them to come with us. None of them could come. We got to the very last page of the phone book and there was a note that said, "When all else fails, bring Rudi Lopez." This is Rudi Lopez! (Laughter.) So if you brothers do not understand something, raise your hand and we'll use Eloy to translate. (Laughter.)

I am a student of history. I've spent many years looking at it. And right now I am thinking historically. We have present many church leaders. We also have present a man who has very radical views of church leadership. That man will be challenging these church leaders. According to history, what is supposed to happen at the end of today is you will take me out and burn me at the stake. On behalf of my wife and my children, I ask you to please not do this. Rudi, however, is another matter. (Laughter.)

You must understand, brothers, that I do not know what Rudi is telling you. For all I know, he could be preaching his own message! (Laughter.) Therefore, if I say anything that angers you, then rest assured that it came from Rudi and not from me. So direct your stones at him. (Laughter.)

PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

I do not know how to begin this. I guess I will start out by saying to you that some of our views of the church are similar. Our burden for the oneness of God's people is the same. But our views on church leadership are poles apart.

I also want you to know at the very beginning that I have not come here to take any of your people. I will not take any of your people. We may end today disagreeing. But you are still my brothers, and I am your brother. I came to Chile because I was invited. I believe it is the Lord's will that I be here.

I am going to tell you about my practice in the United States when it comes to the church. It is different from yours. I am going to ask your permission to challenge you. May I challenge you? (Yes.) May I call into question some of your present understanding? (Yes.) Will you be kind to me after I do it? (Laughter.)

I will tell you a little bit about myself. When I was twenty-three years old, I left the institutional church. And I began meeting with a group of brothers and sisters. All of us were seekers. We began meeting in a home. We did not have a clergy. We had no leaders. We met this way for eight years. Our intention was to learn how to meet under the headship of Christ. Now, brothers, we had many problems. And we experienced many things. But we came into an experience of the church of Jesus Christ that was phenomenal. We experienced Christ together in a way that I had only read about in books.

Halfway into that experience, I met a brother who was a co-worker with and a disciple of Watchman Nee. His name is Stephen Kaung. Stephen came to the United States in the 1950s. Today, he is in his 80s. Since 1993, I have had a close relationship with brother Kaung. He has taught me a great deal. He helped us when we were meeting. I can stay here all day telling you stories about my experience in that church. But I will not.

For the past four years I have been working with an older brother named Gene Edwards. Gene is about seventy years old. He is conducting a workers training at the present time of which I am a part.

What Gene does, what I do, and what the other brothers that I work with do is this: we plant churches the same way that Paul of Tarsus did. We go into a city and we preach Jesus Christ--and nothing but Jesus Christ. We teach God's people how to experience Him corporately. We train them how to function together. Now you may not believe this next point, brothers, but it nevertheless is true. We leave the churches on their own without any leadership! But before we do, we teach them how to meet under the headship of Christ without anyone over them. And it works, and it is glorious.

CHURCH MEETINGS AFTER THE FIRST CENTURY

There are about thirteen churches like I've described in the United States. Their meetings are unbelievable. Brother Rudi is in one of these churches. The church has been meeting for three years. Brothers, there are no leaders controlling the church, facilitating the meetings, or taking care of the problems. All of the brothers share the responsibility of ministry and oversight. And they, the brothers and the sisters, take care of one another.

The brothers get together once a week. They make decisions for the church. They do not act until they all agree. These meetings are wonderful. The brothers love them. They last a long time. You can imagine that: without anyone leading. Leadership comes from all of the brothers. When that church is about ten years old, there will emerge from within it, naturally, organically, spontaneously, older brothers with greater wisdom.

What I am about to say is very important. Those brothers (with more wisdom) will not control the church. Those brothers will not do all the ministry. Those brothers will simply be there as brothers. When there is a crisis that hits that church, the saints will naturally, without anybody telling them, look to these brothers. When they do so they will give weight to what these brothers say. Not because they have a position. But because they have proved by their lives that they are wiser and that they have excelled in service.

If you were to visit one of the meetings of the churches that I work with and the churches that Gene works with, this is what you might see. Each meeting is different, but this is a typical one.

You would see a meeting that has no leadership. No human head is in the meeting. The first thing you would notice is that the people would all gather in the center of the room. They would do something that you probably have never seen before. All of the brothers and the sisters would stand close to one another. They would put their arms around one another like this (demonstrating). And they would form a close circle. And then one of the brothers or the sisters would start a song.

Then after the song is over, spontaneously, without anybody telling them, another brother or sister would offer a prayer. Someone else would start another song. Someone would give a prayer. Someone would start another song. Then a few people would pray. Someone would give a declaration about Christ. Somebody else would give praise to the Lord. Someone else would start a song. There is no song leader to lead the singing in this meeting. The songs are coming from the body.

At some point, the saints will sit down. Brother Rudi may stand up and share Jesus Christ. What will he share? He will share his experience of the Lord that week. The brothers and the sisters in the church get up in the mornings in pairs, in threes, and they come before the Lord to encounter Him, to touch Him.

Rudi will share what he has touched and experienced of Christ earlier that week. He may share two minutes. He may share ten minutes. He may share five minutes. He may share fifteen minutes. He will sit down and a sister will stand up. She will add to what Rudi has shared. She will sit down and another sister will stand up. She will share Jesus Christ. A brother will then stand up and share Jesus Christ. Another brother will share Jesus Christ. Another sister, etc.

Some may have a poem to share. Some may have a short word of teaching. Some may have an exhortation. This meeting will be in harmony. What is shared will be living. It will give life. There will be no chaos. It will not be disorderly. If you're sitting down watching this, you will be looking for the person who is directing the meeting. You will be looking for the leader. But brothers, you will not find one! This meeting does not have any human headship!

But there is a leader. He's invisible. Jesus Christ is leading this meeting through the brothers and the sisters! And this is our experience. Brothers, I lie not. This is our experience.

In that meeting there will be older brothers (unless the church is young). They are watching in the meeting. If someone were to come into that meeting and try to take it over, these older brothers would probably be the first ones to stop them. But those older brothers are pretty much hidden. You would not know that they were respected because everyone else is sharing just as much as they are--or even more. Now I've just described to you brothers what a first-century elder is.

SETTING THE STAGE

At this time, what I would like to do with your permission, as this as a background, is something that to my knowledge has probably never been done before in this city. I would like to take you through the entire story of the first-century church. I'm not going to throw verses at you. Instead we're going to look at the whole story of the first-century church from beginning to end. I would like to give you what I believe to be Scriptural support. Support that in my personal judgment cannot be denied. Scriptural support of what I've just described to you. Then when I have finished, if it is okay with you, you can throw your questions at me.

Brothers, I want to say this to you: when we are done, if you disagree with me and I disagree with you, I am still your brother. And I will not take any of your people. We'll just be brothers who disagree.

If you are open to this and we have the time after lunch, I would like to tell you the story of where the modern pastoral office came from. I would like to tell you the story through history of how things got the way they are today. Where did the Protestant pastor come from? He did not come from the story of the early church. Where did our present views of authority come from? Where did the institutional church come from? Brothers, I will give you the story from history. All of it is built on human tradition.

I am working on a book right now. The book is a discussion about where our Protestant church traditions came from. When did Christians start meeting in buildings? When did believers start sitting in pews and watching a church service as passive spectators? Where did the pulpit come from? Why is it that when the clergy ministers, they are elevated above the people in a typical church building? Why is it that people "dress up" when they go to church? When did that start? Where did Sunday school come from? Where did the seminary come from? This is going to get me stoned probably, but where did a paid professional clergy come from!?

Brothers, I'm a radical. I have revolutionary views. But they are not any more radical or any more revolutionary than the first-century church. I believe we have inherited, through our culture and 1700 years of church tradition, our present mindset.

Now what does that mean? That means, brothers, that if you are doing something that is not according to spiritual principle . . . if by the end of the day you conclude that much of what you have been taught did not originate with God . . . nor with Jesus Christ . . . nor can it be supported with Scripture . . . it means that it is not your fault. It is not your fault because you inherited this mindset. You've been taught it. You've never seen another alternative.

However, by the end of this day you will have heard. And you will know. You will be responsible. Then the decision will be yours.

At this point does anyone want to say anything?

Question: Has anybody read a book from Frank? I want to know if anybody has read anything from Frank. (Many raise their hands.)

One of my books entitled RETHINKING THE WINESKIN, which is a fancy way of saying "Rethinking the Church," is now in print in your language (Spanish). I just got these books this week, so I have only brought a few copies. But I can tell you how to get more if you want to get them by the end of the day. I only ask this: that if I give you a book, you promise you won't burn it. (Laughter.)

Question: From your perspective, do you plant churches that are without human leadership? For our belief is that there already is a church in Santiago that has raised elders over the years. What is your perspective?

I'm going to answer that by saying this: I'm not here to take any of your people. Ask me the same question at the end of the day and I will repeat what I just said. But I will also answer more specifically. Thank you for the question.

I perceive that most of the men in this room, if not all the men in this room, have left something. I'm sure some of you men have paid a price. I am aware of the situation in Chile. If I was not, I do not think I should have come here. I don't think I should be in this room if I haven't learned about your situation.

I would simply ask you to keep this question in mind, and you gentlemen will have to answer it. The question is this, "In leaving what we have left, are we still bringing to God's people the same things that were brought to them in the system that we have left?" To put it another way, "Have you really left the system as much as you would like to think you have?"

At the end of the day, you all may say: "Yes, we have. This is wonderful confirmation." Or you may come to a very different conclusion. But I want to say again that I am impressed that all of you have come here together as you have. This to me is remarkable.

DIRECTION IN THE CHURCH

Question: If there is no human head in the meeting, what is your position on the subject of leadership in the church?

Let me clear up some language. In the meeting, the church meeting, where God's people gather, there is no human headship. There is no one leading that meeting. There's no one even facilitating it. But when it comes to the decisions that must be made on behalf of the church, taking care of church affairs and dealing with church problems--again this may be hard for you to imagine--but the whole church does it together. The church makes the decisions before the Lord.

The brothers get together once a week and together they get the mind of the Lord. One week, Rudi may play a very large part. In another meeting, Chuck may play a very large part. In another week, Paul and Dave may play a very large part. But everyone is participating to get the Lord's mind. As you will see as I go through the New Testament story, I do not believe that the elders-pastors-overseers were the ones that made decisions in the church. We believe in leadership, but our experience is that leadership comes from the whole church.

In the churches we work with, the brothers, when they make decisions, will pass it by the sisters. The sisters have a say in the churches that we work with. If they don't like something that the brothers have decided, they will tell the brothers. And it has been our experience that when the sisters don't like something it usually reflects the Lord's mind! The brothers have made a mistake. This is what we have found, believe it or not.

My role, Gene's role, the other men I work with, our role, is to teach God's people how to meet this way. We equip them. We show them how to make decisions together. How to get the Lord's mind together. We show them how to experience Jesus Christ. We show them how to share Him with one another. We teach them how to follow Him in a meeting. We teach the brothers who like to talk a lot how to restrain themselves so that others may share. We teach those who are timid how to be courageous and speak. We have many ways by which we do this. Our job is to raise up a functioning priesthood that expresses Jesus Christ corporately without us being present.

Now, brothers, some of you in this room are going to hear what I have said today and you're going to go back to your group and you're going to say, "This is wonderful. I'm going to try to implement this." And you're going to say to your people, "We're going to have meetings where you function." And you're going to find that it's not going to work.

Brothers, what we do is difficult. But we have experience. And I am not speaking to you as someone with a lot of theories. Everything that I will share with you from the story today is our experience.

Question: How do you make decisions as the whole church? By consensus? We believe that the early church made their decisions unanimously and that was the best way to ensure that the mind of Jesus Christ had been reached. The way we do it is thusly: The brothers get together and they discuss an issue. They make decisions together. Sometimes when they hit a very rough situation, they may share with one another for five or seven hours and still not have the Lord's mind. They will then say, "Brothers, let's give this to the Lord and continue it next week." After much discussion, listening to one another, and prayer, eventually the church comes to a full agreement. They get the Lord's mind together. I've never seen it otherwise. But it takes time. (Editor's Note: for a discussion on how a church gets the Lord's mind corporately, see Frank's message "Laying Hold of the Mind of Christ".)

SOME PERSONAL REMARKS

Are you brothers ready? Is it okay if I stand up?

We have a joke in Cesar's home that everything that we find unusual is normal in Chile. At least that is what Cesar is telling us. Let me give you an example. I love your food. I'm an Italian-American, I am used to eating a lot. Brothers, I have never eaten so much in my life since I've been here. The food is wonderful. I have come to fall in love with bread and cheese at all times of the day. (Laughter.) But there is something that I don't quite understand. And that is your driving! (Laughter.) That is a consensus, eh? No need to debate that one, is there? (Laughter.)

There have been about seven times this week where I was convinced that I was going to meet the Lord on the road! (Laughter.) I don't know how to describe to you, but this has happened more than once. Our brother Cesar is driving us around town. A car will be coming straight at us. He will move over to the left and cut off another car. He'll stop in the middle of the road. Buses will fly by us and cut us off. He will be in full traffic and someone will drive backwards. Another car will be coming and we Americans are scared to death.

And he says, "This is normal in Chile." And then I asked our brother, "Are there any accidents? Do other cars ever hit your car?"

"Oh no," he said.

Brother Rudi then began to inspect his car. There were many, many dents all along the sides, in the front, and in the back. But "this is normal in Chile." (Laughter.)

THE LORD JESUS CHRIST AND AUTHORITY

All right, brothers. Let's start with the Lord Jesus Christ. You have to remember that Jesus Christ came into the earth at a time when the Romans were in power. Now, the Romans had a certain kind of leadership that marked their society. They got this leadership model from the Babylonians and from the Egyptians. But the Romans brought it to perfection. It was the hierarchical leadership structure. In my country, the military is patterned after this structure. The Romans were great warriors.

Do you understand hierarchy? You have someone at the top, then you have someone at the bottom, then you have someone at the very bottom. The one at the top has more authority than the one below him. The person lower has less authority than the one above, and on it goes. It is a descending order of authority. It's top-down authority. It is a command style relationship.

The Romans perfected this structure. It was part of their culture. With that in mind, listen to the words of Jesus Christ. Matthew 20:25, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their great men exercise authority over them."

The Greek word for "authority" is *exousia*. Brothers, you can read the New Testament from beginning to end and you will never ever find this word *exousia* (authority) in a context where one believer in Christ has *exousia* (authority) over another believer! You will never find that in the New Testament. It is not there.

Let's go on. Jesus said, "The rulers of the Gentiles [the Romans] lord it over those who are under them." The Greek word for "exercise authority" is *katexousiazō*. The Greek word for "lord it over" is *katakuriēuo*. *Kata* means above or over. *Kuriēuo* means to exercise lordship or mastery over someone else. *Exousiazō* means to exercise authority over another. Jesus is condemning hierarchical leadership here.

According to Jesus, the Gentiles exercise authority from the top-down. They are lording it over the people. They are dominating the people. They are controlling the people. This always happens with hierarchical structures of descending authority. It creates a culture of control and oppression.

But our Lord says, "It shall not be so among you!" Jesus Christ, when He came into this earth, was the most liberated Person to walk this planet. His main job was to set people free. He is the Great Liberator. In his day, he set the women free. The women followed Him wherever He was. And when He died on the cross, it was the women who were there, staying with Him. When He rose again from the dead, it was the women who came to Him first. Jesus Christ had a very exalted view of His people. He had a very exalted view of women in a day when they were oppressed and suppressed. He was a liberator. This is very important, brothers. There is something in your Lord that is liberating, that comes to set people free.

Jesus says, "Whoever wishes to be great among you of my disciples, he shall be your servant." I'm just going to give an opening statement at this point. The mark of a servant of God is that he comes to set people free. Not to lord over them. Not to control them. But to set them free. One of the major things that I do in planting a church is I set the people free. And that is the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Now, let us go to Matthew 28.

Jesus Christ is getting ready to ascend. These are some of his last words. You are familiar with them. Matthew 28:18, "All authority is given to me in heaven and on earth. All authority is mine."

Now, brothers, I'm going to make a statement: There is no authority except the authority of Jesus Christ. Only He has authority. There is no authority except His authority. This is important.

THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM

Jesus Christ ascends. And twelve apostles are sent to Jerusalem. They raise up a church in Jerusalem. It is very large. On the first day there are three thousand in that church. Now, I want us to go to the book of Acts. I want to give you the flavor of what the church in Jerusalem was like. They met in homes all throughout the city. Their meetings were open. The brothers and sisters freely shared with each other. Yes, they did gather at Solomon's Porch to hear the apostles share Christ with them. The apostles were training them how to know their Lord and how to meet. But the brothers and sisters were freely meeting in homes all throughout Jerusalem. They met for six solid years and it was just the apostles and the people. Brothers, there were no designated leaders except for those twelve apostles who were sent by Jesus Christ. It was the apostles who were planting the church and the brothers and sisters. No designated leaders.

Then there was the dispersion. And the brothers and the sisters scattered all throughout Palestine. Some of them went as far as Antioch in Syria. There was another church raised up. It was in Antioch. The church of Antioch grew very quickly. In time there

were prophets and teachers. These are gifts. These are functions. You will never read anywhere in the New Testament that there were elders in the church in Antioch. But there were prophets and teachers.

Meanwhile, back in Jerusalem, the church is growing again after the dispersion. Brothers, fourteen years have now passed. The church in Jerusalem is fourteen years old. And in Acts 11 we are told that the Jerusalem church is suffering poverty and the Antioch church wants to help them. So Antioch sends money to Jerusalem to help relieve their poverty. And in Acts 11:30, Luke says that Saul and Barnabas, acting as representatives for the Antioch church, sent the money from Antioch to the elders in Jerusalem. Now there are elders in Jerusalem. But this took fourteen years!

Now, listen to me carefully. Every time you hear about the Jerusalem church before this, it's always "the apostles and the people." Now Luke mentions elders. What are they doing here? They're just accepting money to give to the church. That's all they are doing.

ELDERS IN GALATIA

Then something interesting happens. Turn to Acts 14. Back in Antioch, the Holy Spirit sends out Saul and Barnabas to preach the gospel to the heathen. They are sent out. They are now apostles--sent ones; I like the term "church planters" better. Or "workers." Whatever it is you wish to call them. But they plant churches.

The men head to South Galatia. They preach the gospel in four cities. There are four churches raised up in those cities. They only spend about five months with each of those churches, preaching the gospel and equipping the saints. They leave those churches on their own without any leadership. And they leave them between six months and a whole year without any leadership. Where is the leadership during that time? The church is in the hands of the brothers and sisters. They lead. Do you understand this?

Then they come back to those four towns. And when they come back, we are told in verse 23 of Chapter 14, that they did something interesting.

Can anyone in the room give me the name of these four churches without looking at your New Testament? Okay, here they are: Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. Now on the way back, Luke says that Paul and Barnabas acknowledged elders in every church.

The original word in the Greek (usually translated "ordained") means "acknowledged" or "recognized." They acknowledged elders in every church. It is not an official ordination like ministers are ordained today. And brothers, listen. The phrase "every church" does not mean every church in the world. It means every church in South Galatia in 49 A.D. I am giving you context. Some have taught that every church must have elders. And they base this idea on this verse. But that is not what this verse is saying at all. It is speaking about every church in South Galatia in 49 A.D.

Now, let me just stop to make a point. The way that we have been taught to approach the New Testament is by taking one verse out of one of Paul's letters, another verse from Peter's letter, another verse from another letter of Paul written at a different time to a different group of people, another verse out of Acts, lifting them out of their historical context and then pasting them all together. This is how we learn Scripture. But it is totally wrong.

By using this approach, you can prove any doctrine, you can support any practice. What I am giving you today is the story in its historical context. When you do that, things look totally different. This is important.

Okay, Paul and Barnabas acknowledged elders. The word "elder" is translated from the Greek word presbuteros. It simply means "old man." It means someone who is more seasoned than the others. So Paul says to the brothers and sisters in the Galatian churches the following:

"Brothers and sisters, it's been a year since I have been here. I have watched you all function. The meetings are in your hands. You've made decisions on your own. You will still do this, but I'm leaving. I'm going back to Antioch. I may not ever come back here. Therefore, if you have a problem. If you have a crisis, I want you to look to these particular brothers because they are older and more mature. I have watched them in the short time I've been back. And they are reported by you all to have excelled in service. You already know to look to them in times of crises. I am just acknowledging publicly what you already know to be true. They have been caring for the brothers and sisters. So if there is a problem, listen to what they have to say."

He did not say, "Now these men are going to control your meetings." He did not say, "They, like the Roman lords, have authority over all of you." He did not say, "Whatever they say is the voice of God. You must obey them." No! He said, "These are the older brothers in the church who have shown that they have wisdom. And they are faithful to serve. Give weight to what they say." I will prove this to you.

THE CHURCHES IN GALATIA

Paul and Barnabas go back to Antioch. These four churches in Galatia have visitors that come from Jerusalem. They are Jewish Christians who still have an institutional, legalistic mind.

They believe that to be saved you must not only believe on Christ. You must keep the Law of Moses also, which includes circumcision for men. So these Jerusalem brothers, these Judaizers, visit these four specific churches. And they tell the saints there all kinds of things. They say, "Paul didn't come from Jerusalem. That means he's not a real apostle. Not only that, but we saw him rebuke Peter, the greatest apostle. We watched it when we visited Antioch. Because Paul is a man-pleaser, he has not told you the whole gospel. He has withheld from you the truth about keeping the Law."

Some of the Galatians are believing these Judaizers. Paul gets word of it, and he writes a letter. Brother, what is the name of that letter? Galatians. That's right. Let's turn to Galatians.

All right, brothers, I have a question: Are there elders in the Galatian churches? Yes. Yes, there are elders there. Paul acknowledged them about a year ago. Paul has heard that these visitors have come with another gospel. So he writes Galatians and he says in verse 1, "Paul, an apostle, sent from God, not sent from man but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead." And then he says in verse 2, "To the elders of the churches in Galatia." No! that's not what it says, is it?

Paul writes to who? He writes to the church, to the brothers and sisters. He does not write to the elders! Think about that, brothers. Think about that. In fact, these Galatian churches are going through a major crisis. The very gospel of Jesus Christ is at stake. And Paul never once, not once, mentions the elders!

Now, if the elders in the first century are the men who led the church, make decisions for the church, are responsible for the church's health, and represent the church, then why didn't Paul mention them!? The answer is obvious, brothers. Those elders did not have that kind of power. The church was in the hands of the people, and Paul wrote to the brothers and the sisters. And he addressed the problem to the brothers and the sisters. Because it was their problem. So they, the church, were to take care of it.

Now, brothers, when I write a letter to one of the churches that I work with, I, like Paul, write it to the church. And the church reads it together. The church is responsible for its message. It is responsible for its problems. It is responsible for the ministry.

This continues. Galatia is not an isolated situation. I want to make a comment now. And I want you to think about it. In all of Paul's 9 letters to the churches, he mentions "the brethren" 130 times. He mentions elders 5 times. He mentions pastors 1 time. The phrase "brethren" referred to the brothers and the sisters. This is significant. It points to the fact that Paul sees the leadership and ministry of the church as belonging to the whole body, not to the elders.

Do you know why Paul wrote his letters to the churches and not to the elders? Do you know why he mentions "the brethren" far more than he does elders and pastors? Do you know why he never addresses a church problem to an elder or pastor? Because all authority is given to Jesus Christ! The church is the corporate Christ! So all authority is in the church! It is not given to certain men. It is in the church.

All right, let's continue. After Paul writes the letter to the Galatians, there is a great council in Jerusalem. There is a debate over the Law of Moses. When the Jerusalem council met, all the saints in Jerusalem met together. It was the whole church meeting, with the apostles and the elders. And the Scripture tells us that the church made this decision with the apostles and the elders. The elders didn't make the decision and say, "Okay, church, this is what you have to do." No, all the brothers and sisters, "the whole church," with the apostles and elders, made the decision together. This is very clear from Acts 15:22.

Further, Acts 15:23-25 tells us that the apostles, the elders, and the brethren (the church), wrote their decision in a letter. It's the brothers and sisters, apostles, and the elders that wrote it. It wasn't just the apostles and the elders. Brothers, are you following me? The church made the decision with the apostles and the elders. This is very important.

THE CHURCH IN THESSALONICA

Paul now takes Silas with him, and they go to Greece. They plant four churches in Greece. Can anyone in the room name those four churches? They are: Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and Corinth. Four churches. Paul and Silas, with Timothy, spent about three months with each of them except Corinth. The Corinthians were not very smart. So they had to spend eighteen months there. And still it didn't do much good because they had more problems than any other church!

Now, Paul plants a church in Philippi. He then goes to Thessalonica and plants a church there. He only spends three months in Thessalonica. He leaves behind Timothy in Thessalonica who they took with them on the trip. Then he comes to Berea, and then Corinth. Timothy meets Paul in Corinth and says, "Paul, the church in Thessalonica is having many problems."

Listen to me, brothers. The church in Thessalonica is only six months old. These are new Christians. Have you ever met a Christian who is six months old? Is a Christian who is six months old mature? No. He's a baby Christian, right? Yes, amen. Virtually all these young Christians in Thessalonica were heathens before they met the Lord (some were Jews).

Timothy says to Paul, "Paul, the Thessalonian Christians are being persecuted. Some of them are being tempted to go back to their old life of immorality. They need to be encouraged."

Paul then sends Timothy back to Thessalonica with a letter. I want you to turn to 1 Thessalonians. Now, brothers, here is what it is important for you to know. The church in Thessalonica was free to make their own decisions just like all of the other churches that came from Paul's hand. Here is Paul's letter. I want to read the opening verse. "Paul, Silas and Timothy to the elders in the church in Thessalonica." Is that what it says? No! He writes to the church! "To the brothers and the sisters." He writes to them. It is to the church that he gives his instructions. It is to the church that he addresses the problems. He expects the brothers and the sisters, the church, to take care of its own problems!

"But Brother Frank, what about Chapter 5:12-13?" Let us look at Chapter 5:11. Paul says to the church, "Encourage one another. Build up one another. Just as you are also doing." They, the brothers and the sisters, were ministering one to another. They were taking care of one another. And then Paul says, "But we request of you that you appreciate [or recognize] those who labor for you and direct you."

The Greek word translated "direct" here is *proistemi*. It means to guard and provide care. "You esteem them [those who guard and care for you] very highly because of their work." Then in verse 14 he writes to the church again, "the brethren," and he says, "warn the unruly, comfort the feeble, support the weak, and be patient with one another." This is the church's task.

Now, brothers, listen to me. This church is six months old. Six months old! There are no elders in this church. It is impossible to have them. Paul planted the church and never returned to acknowledge elders. He has only spent three months time with them. He could not have acknowledged elders after three months time! And when he wrote this letter, the church is only six months old.

Who then is Paul referring to in Chapter 5:12-13? Who are these men who are to be esteemed because they care for the flock? He is referring to Timothy, Silas and himself; all three men are workers, called to the work. They are the ones caring for the church at this time.

The verse says esteem them because of "their work." Paul is essentially saying, "Brothers, we are your workers. And we are caring for you right now. Recognize and appreciate us. Appreciate Timothy when I send him back to you. For he cares for you. Appreciate Silas and myself for we labor for you." But he is saying it in such a way that doesn't draw direct attention to himself or the men.

There cannot be elders in this church. Impossible. But even if you believe there were elders, fine. He just says, "Appreciate them. Esteem them." But remember: this whole letter is written to the church and he is waiting to the last chapter to say, "Esteem what these men do. Appreciate what they do." That's it. He didn't say "Obey everything they say." This is a very different mindset than what we have been taught to have.

Timothy comes back to Corinth where Paul is and he says, "Brother Paul, I read the letter, but the saints are confused. You answered their question about what happens to believers when they die. And you mentioned the Lord's return. But now they think that Jesus is coming back any second because you said that the Lord will be returning. So half the church has quit their jobs and they are mooching off the other saints. This is a real problem."

So Paul writes another letter. It is called 2 Thessalonians. This is how he starts it. 2 Thessalonians 1:1: "Paul, Silas and Timothy to the elders." No! "To the church." This church was having a big problem. Imagine your congregation. Half the saints have quit their jobs and are now living off of the other brothers and sisters. If Paul were your worker, he would not write to you elders in this room! He would write to the church. In this entire letter, Paul never mentions local leaders. Why? Because he knew that the church was led by the church. Leadership was in the hands of the church. But we aren't finished.

THE CHURCH IN CORINTH

After Paul spends eighteen months in Corinth and raises up a church in that city, he leaves. He goes to Antioch. After he is in Antioch, he comes to Ephesus. He spends three years in Ephesus, brothers. While he is there, he gets word from a woman named Chloe and the people that work with her. They had just visited Corinth. Chloe's people tell Paul about all the problems they witnessed in the Corinthian church. Not long after that, Paul gets a letter from the Corinthians themselves, handed to him by three brothers in the church. The letter contains a list of questions for Paul. The church in Corinth is about six years old. Not six months. Six years.

Let's list the problems that they are having. What's happening in Corinth? Divisions. They're breaking up into four different camps. Immorality. There is incest. Abusing the Lord's Supper. They're getting drunk at the Lord's Supper; others are over-eating at the supper. They are taking each other to court. They are not loving one another. They are arguing. I'll tell you another one: they are doubting the resurrection. (See Chapter 15.) Can you think of anything else? Some of them are going back to their own pagan lifestyles and they are visiting prostitutes. (See Chapter 6.) This is a first-class mess.

I'm sure Paul threw up his hands and said, "I wish I never met these people! Six years and this stuff is going on?" So Paul picks up his pen and he writes a long letter. It fills 16 chapters in our version.

I would like to read to you the first words. 1 Corinthians 1:1. Keep in mind everything that is happening in this church. "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God and Sosthenes who is with us, to the elders of the church. To the elders who are not doing their job. To the elders who are not controlling God's people very well."

Is that what he says? No!! He writes, "To the church!" "To the brothers and sisters. This is your problem. I expect you to take care of it. The church is in your hands. God has given you, the brothers and the sisters, the responsibility for church affairs."

But this next point is even more arresting. Paul never once mentions elders! Not once! Not once does he mention a pastor! Not once an overseer! It's not there, brothers! Over 30 times he says "brothers." "Brothers, I implore you." "Brothers, I beseech you." "Brothers, you are supposed to take this man who is committing incest and hand him over to Satan." "You, brothers, are to do this." Not the elders!

But it doesn't end there. Paul now leaves Ephesus and visits Macedonia. He probably visits the church in Philippi which is in Macedonia. Paul gets word that men in Jerusalem have come to the Corinthian church and they are trying to take it over. They are speaking evil of Paul. They are teaching the people that they must follow the Law of Moses. They are claiming that they are the real apostles because they have letters from Jerusalem. Paul has no such letter. Paul didn't come from Jerusalem (where all true apostles come from). And he is preaching a false gospel.

These Judaizers are saying, "We have visions. We have experiences with God. We come from Jerusalem. We have letters. We are the true apostles. You'd better follow us. Do not follow Paul." The alarming thing is that some of the Corinthians were being deceived by these men.

Brothers, if there was ever a time to blow the whistle for the elders or rebuke the elders or address the elders, it would be now. But let's look at 2 Corinthians. Let us see if Paul has gotten his act together. Let's see if he finally realizes that he needs to get the elders involved.

2 Corinthians 1:1, "Paul an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God and Timothy our brother who is with me, to the elders." No! Again, he writes, "To the church!" Brothers, he spoke to the church all throughout this letter. It was to the church. The church is God's people. The church's problems belong to God's people.

THE CHURCH IN ROME

Paul now leaves Macedonia and pays a visit to Corinth. He visits this very troubled church for three months in the winter of 57 A.D. From Corinth, he writes a letter to the church in Rome that he actually transplanted while he was in Ephesus.

The book of Romans is regarded as the greatest writing of Paul. Everything that is important to the Christian faith is in this letter. It is his masterpiece work.

Now, brothers, listen to me carefully. The church in Rome is about six years old. This is the sixth letter that Paul will write. I want you to look at the book of Romans. I want to tell you why he wrote this letter.

Paul is getting old now, and there are new converts being made in the church in Rome. Paul has never been to Rome. He sent people he knew to Rome. The church was transplanted. But he never went to Rome. He wrote this letter to give a comprehensive statement of the Christian faith for the new converts. There are Jews and Gentiles in this church. They are having problems with one another. Paul heard about it. Some believe that you are supposed to eat only clean foods. The Gentiles believe you could eat

any kind of foods. The Jewish Christians believe that you have to keep certain days holy. The Gentile Christians believe every day is the same.

There is internal conflict. They are fighting, brothers. The Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians are not getting along.

So Paul writes, "To all who are beloved of God in Rome, to those who are called saints." Paul never once mentions pastors, elders or overseers in this letter! It is written to the church and for the church. And this is the most important document explaining the Christian faith.

But that's not all. In the very last chapter, Chapter 16, Paul greets the people in the church. He greets twenty-six individual people and five households. And he mentions various things about them. He never once mentions elders, overseers or pastors!

True to his style, the letter is written to the church. And when he deals with their problems in Chapters 13-15, he writes to the church and addresses the church. He tells them to admonish one another. In other words, "This is your problem, church. You deal with it."

THE CHURCHES IN COLOSSE AND EPHEBUS

Paul visits Jerusalem. He's almost killed. He's put in prison in Caesarea. Then he is taken to Rome as a prisoner. In Rome, Paul is on house arrest. He will write his most profound letters from prison. The first one is Colossians.

Turn over to Colossians. Can anyone in the room tell me who started the church in Colosse? It was not Paul. It was Epaphras. Epaphras was a man that Paul led to the Lord. Epaphras went back to his hometown in Colosse, and he raised up a church. This church is about six years old. They are having major problems. Jewish Christians have given the Colossians a false gospel. Epaphras visits Paul in Rome. Here we have a younger apostle visiting an older apostle.

Epaphras says to Paul, "Visitors have come to the church in Colosse with a false gospel." Remember, Paul has never been to this church. So Paul starts to yell and scream at Epaphras saying, "You appointed the wrong elders. This is not supposed to happen. The elders are supposed to keep this stuff from happening. Let me handle it. I'll write to those elders." And in Colossians 1:1 he says, "Paul an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God to the elders."

No! It is to the saints! To the faithful brethren! The letter is addressed to the brothers and the sisters! And Paul speaks to the church the whole way through. He ministers to the church because this is the church's problem. There is not one mention of elders. Not one mention of overseers. Not one mention of pastors. Brothers, consider this!

About the same time Paul has it on his heart to present his gospel of God's eternal purpose to all the saints in Asia Minor: to Ephesus as well as to all the other Christians in the region. He does this in the letter to the Ephesians. It is the crown of Paul's ministry.

Ephesians 1:1 says, "Paul an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God to the elders who are at Ephesus." Is that what it says? Absolutely not! This letter is to the brothers and the sisters. And finally in chapter four, finally, Paul breaks down and says the word "shepherds." All of Paul's letters previous to this one never mention "shepherds" (pastors).

Shockingly, all he says about them in chapter four is that the shepherds and teachers are there to help equip the saints. Equip the saints to do what? To minister one to another. To take care of their own problems. To be the church. And those shepherds do not lord it over God's people! They are among the flock, not over the flock. They are just the older brothers. And Paul never writes a letter to them when the church is in crisis. Never!

Then Paul says to the church in Ephesians 5:21, "And subject yourselves one to another." Why? Because the authority of God is on the body. The authority is given to Jesus Christ, and the church is the corporate Christ. The authority rests in the church. We are to submit ourselves one to another.

PAUL TO THE EPHESIAN ELDERS

But brothers, there is one small point that I left out. I want to go back. Let's go back to when Paul raised up the church in Ephesus. He did it in three years. It was an intense three years. He ministered Christ every day for two of those years in the school of Tyrannus from 11:00 am to 4:00 pm. He was also training workers whom he would send out throughout Asia Minor to plant churches. He trained them in Ephesus. It was those men who brought the gospel throughout Asia Minor. You know the names of some of those churches. They are mentioned in Revelation Chapter 2 and 3. They were planted during Paul's Ephesian trip: between 52 and 55 AD.

All right, now watch. When Paul left Ephesus on his way to Jerusalem, he and the men that were with him (whom he trained as workers) met with the elders in Ephesus. What Paul said to these elders is something that every brother in this room needs to hear with your physical ears and your spiritual ears.

I will read to you Acts 20:17, "And from the city of Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church." So there are elders in Ephesus. When Paul writes Ephesians about five years later, there were elders present in the church. But Paul never addresses them. Not at all. Interesting, eh?

Now we are in Miletus. And Paul speaks to these elders. It is about 57 A.D. In Acts 20:28 he says to the elders, who are the older men, "Be on your guard for yourself and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers." Notice what he says: "Among the flock, which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers." Not over the flock; among the flock. Among the flock! Among the flock to do what? "To shepherd the church of God." Not to control the flock, but to care for it. To serve it. The elders are overseers, not overlords!

The word "overseer" means one who looks out for the good of the saints, not for his own personal interests. Yet because overseers care for the saints, they are called shepherds, too. And this is a metaphor, not a title.

All the brothers and sisters take care of one another. All of them take care of one another. But the shepherds are the older, wiser ones that do it best. They are the examples for everyone else. Let me put it this way. Every brother and sister is to do what a true shepherd/elder does. For the elders are examples to all.

Now, hold on to your chair. Get ready. It's going to be heavy, brothers. Look at Acts 20:33. I want you to read very slowly verses 33 to 35. Follow this: "I, Paul, have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. Yes, you elders know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me. I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Now, brothers, let's get the scene. Paul, an apostle sent by God, spends three years raising up the church in Ephesus. Before he leaves, he acknowledges the older brothers, the elders. He says to them, "Take care of God's people if there is a problem." He did not say, "Lord over them. Control them." Nor did he say, "You are their leaders. They must obey you." No, he didn't say that. After about two or three years, he meets with them at Miletus.

And he says, "Brothers, the Holy Spirit has given you a gift to care for the Lord's people. They are the flock of God; not your flock. It's the flock of God, purchased with His own blood. Brothers, when I was with you I worked with my hands. I paid for my own needs, and I also paid for the needs of the men I trained. I gave you an example. Elders, pastors of Ephesus, remember my example. That I did not take anything from God's people! I gave to them! I did not take from them! Follow my example." And that is what an elder is, brothers. He gives! He doesn't receive! Brothers, think about this. Just think about it.

THE CHURCH IN PHILIPPI

Paul is now in Rome, and he's getting ready to write his last letter to the last church. He is an old man. He only has a few years to live. He gets word that the church he planted in Philippi is having problems. It's about 10 years old. There are elders there. They have grown up over the years.

Let me tell you the problems they are having. The sisters in the church are fighting. There's a feud. They aren't getting along. They're ready to kill one another. Have you ever seen this? I have.

The Judaizers have come again. They're saying, "You must be circumcised. You must follow the Law of Moses." Not only that, but some are saying, "We're under grace. It's okay if we sin. It's all right. Let's fill our bellies. Let's live for our flesh."

This church is in trouble, brothers. So Paul will write his last letter to this assembly. Let's look at how he addresses it. Philippians 1:1 says, "Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Christ Jesus to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi. Oh, and by the way, it is to the overseers also."

Paul simply says, "This is to the church first, and it is to you too, elders." And then he writes the rest of the letter to the elders explaining to them that this problem is their problem. Is this what he did, brothers? No! A thousand times no! The letter is written to the church! It's to the church! He never mentions or addresses the overseers again. He merely gives them a fleeting "hello" after he greets the church. Then he never mentions the elders again.

PAUL TO TIMOTHY

Now we are in about 62 A.D. Paul is released from prison. The Ephesian church is being infiltrated with false teachers. And it doesn't seem that the church is handling it very well. Nor does it appear that the elders, the older men in the church, are dealing with the false teachings that some of the younger saints are buying into.

The church in Ephesus is about ten years old now. Paul already acknowledged elders there. We've already met them in Acts 20. But ten years later, Paul writes to his co-worker, Timothy--a younger apostle. Paul says something interesting to Timothy in 1 Timothy 3:1: "If there is any man in the church who aspires to oversight, he desires a good work."

In the Greek there is no word that means "office" in this passage. In fact, nowhere in the New Testament is an elder ever called an office. (Translations that use the word "office" do not reflect the original reading. See *Who is Your Covering?*) Oversight is a function. Not an office.

Paul writes, "If there is a brother that is given to oversight, he desires something good." And now, Paul does something quite interesting. He gives Timothy some of the characteristics of an overseer, that is, an elder.

Now this is what you should be thinking: One, there are already elders in Ephesus. Two, Timothy has been traveling with Paul for about 12 years now. Timothy should know what an elder is. Why would Paul have to tell Timothy what the characteristics of an elder are? He should already know. These are important questions.

I'm going to make two conclusions. First, an elder is not an office. Neither is it a static function. There is no such thing as "once an elder always an elder."

Secondly, Paul wrote this letter to Timothy. In it, he gave him the characteristics of an elder. Timothy should have known them already. But he only should have known if eldership was a big deal. If it was something very well known. Brothers, acknowledging elders was not a big deal in the first-century. Timothy had to be told about this. Perhaps it wasn't for his own sake. Perhaps Paul wrote these characteristics for the church's sake. Either way, it shows that God's people were not conversant about elders. It was not something defined and structured.

Remember, Ephesus is a church that was 10 years old at this point! Timothy had been working with Paul all this time and yet Paul had to say, "Here are the characteristics of an elder."

Paul knew that church was suffering from false teachings that visitors had brought in. Apparently the elders who were there were no longer elder-ing properly. Or maybe they were falling short. Perhaps they were lording it over God's people. 1 Timothy 5:19-22 may indicate this.

Yet here's the point. Timothy had to be told what an elder is. Whether for his sake or for the church's sake. Therefore, elderhood, eldership, what an elder is, was not something that was a big, huge deal. This is consistent with the whole tenor of Paul's letters, as we have seen.

Then, later in the letter, in 1 Timothy 5:17, Paul mentions something interesting. Now brothers, do you remember when Paul was with the elders of Ephesus at Miletus and he said, "I worked with my own hands. I took nothing from the church. You follow

my example. Jesus Christ said it is better to give than to receive. So you elders give and do not receive"? Do you remember that? Brothers, Paul is not contradicting himself here.

Paul is telling Timothy, "Let the older men, the elders, who guard well be given double honor." The word for "guard" (poorly translated "rule" in some translations) is the Greek word *proistemi*. And it means to guard or care for. It doesn't mean to rule. It doesn't mean to control. It means to guard and protect. Paul writes, "The elders who guard well and minister a lot are to be given double honor."

Now, listen to me brothers. Paul told the churches, "Honor one another" (see Romans 14). All the brothers and sisters are to honor one another. He also told the Ephesian church, "Submit one to another." Christians are to honor one another. And submit to one another.

But the brothers who serve the most, those who give of their lives the most, they are worthy of double honor. Paul is telling Timothy, "Make sure the saints appreciate these brothers who labor extra for the church's well-being. Especially those who minister a lot in the meetings. Not who do all the ministry in the meetings. No! But those who teach more than others. They deserve greater respect."

Paul goes on to establish his point by saying: "Do you remember the Scripture that says that an ox is worthy of food? The ox that works is worthy of food. And also, an employee who works is worthy to be paid." Now, follow me brothers. An ox that works deserves food. An employee, a factory worker, deserves to be compensated with money for his hard labor. In the same way, the elders who serve well, who give to the sheep of their lives, are worthy not of food or money, but of greater respect. Double honor.

Paul did not say they are worthy of a salary! He did not say they are worthy of a free meal ticket! He said they are worthy of honor. The Greek words for financial wages (*misthos* and *opsonion*) are not used here. The word that is used is *time*, and it means respect. It means honor. This is confirmed in 1 Timothy 5:19, where Paul says that the elders should not be dishonored by accepting an accusation against them by only one person. An accusation against an elder, because he is to be honored, should be by two or three actual witnesses. Why? Because he is worthy of double honor. Not a salary! But double honor.

Remember, it was to the elders in Ephesus, these same men, that Paul said about five years earlier, "I've worked with my hands. I've taken nothing from the church. I have only given to the church. Follow my example!"

PAUL TO TITUS

We are in 64 A.D. God's people are being persecuted because Nero, the Roman Emperor, is persecuting the Christians in Rome. He's killing them. Most of the saints that are mentioned in Romans 16 (read their names) were tortured. They were burned alive. They were killed by Nero. This happened, brothers.

As this persecution is happening, Paul writes to Titus, another brother whom he worked with. Another brother that he trained. Paul, and perhaps Titus also, planted a number of churches on the island of Crete. Years later, things were falling apart. So Paul wrote to Titus saying, "Go to Crete. Things are falling apart. They are being persecuted. There is false teaching that they are accepting."

Remember there is persecution in the Roman Empire. Paul writes to Titus and says, "Things are breaking down in the churches. Go there. It is now time to acknowledge the older, faithful men to help with this crisis." And then he says, "Acknowledge these men, the ones who are already serving. Acknowledge them. Recognize them in every church."

Brothers, Paul did not say to acknowledge elders in every church in the world. Titus Chapter 1 has been used to justify such a practice. No! He said to acknowledge elders in every church on the island of Crete. This is the context. And then he does the same thing that he does with Timothy. He has to give Titus the characteristics of a true overseer.

Why the characteristics? So that these men will not lord over God's people. They must be trusted. So they will not control the church. Their public recognition did not empower them to control the church nor to do all the ministry. But in times of crisis, the saints should look to them. And Titus is there to point this out.

Again, the characteristics of an elder were not very well known. Titus traveled with Paul for a long time and Paul had to tell him what they are! Eldership, oversight, etc. was not given the kind of attention it is given today.

Finally, Paul writes his last letter before he dies. 2 Timothy. There is no mention of elders or pastors. He says to Timothy, "You are a worker. Be faithful with the work." Timothy was a church planter. He was an itinerant worker. He traveled like Paul did, helped the churches and left. This is what he did. Paul encourages him in this letter to continue faithful with that work.

PETER TO THE CHURCHES IN ASIA MINOR

Paul dies. The churches in Galatia and Asia Minor that Paul planted are suffering. They are being persecuted. Peter, the apostle, is in Rome. Peter knows that Paul is dead. Now these churches need to be cared for by an outside worker. Peter knows that they are suffering so he writes them a letter to encourage them in their suffering. Galatia, Bithnia, Asia Minor, etc. are Paul's territory. This is the Gentile world. These churches are made up, not mostly of Jews, but of Gentiles. But Paul is dead.

With the help of Silas, who was with Peter in Rome, Peter writes a letter to the Christians in Asia Minor and Galatia. It's called 1 Peter. Let's go there.

He opens with, "I am Peter. I am an apostle of Jesus Christ. I am writing to you who reside throughout," and he lists the names of the places. He writes to those Christians who reside in Asia Minor and Galatia. Notice: he doesn't write to the elders. Like Paul, Peter writes to the churches. And everything he says is to the churches. Until he gets to the last chapter. Do you understand the significance of that? First to the church. And after that, Peter wants to say something to the elders.

Brothers, hear this with the ears of your spirit. Peter knows that the church is having a hard time. They are suffering. There is a tendency in men, in our human nature, to control God's people when things are going wrong among them. In our effort to protect them, there is a tendency to control them. Peter knew this. Peter also knew that Paul was dead. So he wanted to say something to the elders.

1 Peter 5:1 says, "Therefore, I, Peter, speak to the elders who are among you." Notice: among you, not over you. The elders are among the church, not over the church!

He goes on, "I am an elder--an old, faithful man. You also are old, faithful men." Verse 2: "Shepherd [that means take care of] the flock of God." Let me tell you what the Greek says, "Shepherd the flock that is among you." Not under you. Do you understand? The church is among the elders, not under them!

He continues: "Exercise the oversight." He doesn't say overlord; he says oversight. He is telling them, "Look out for the saints. Care for them; they're hurting. You are older brothers, you know better. I am exhorting you to look after your younger brothers and sisters." That's what he is saying. "Not under compulsion. Not for dishonest gain. Not to take from them."

Then we have verse 3: "Not as being lords over those entrusted to you, but by being examples to the flock." Not lording over the flock, but being examples to them. He then says to the younger brothers and sisters, "You younger brethren, submit your heart, listen to, and give weight to what the elders say to you. Not because they have authority over you. Not because they have the right to control you. But because they are older in spiritual life." But as he closes in verse 5, he tells them all: "be subject to one another in humility." These are echoes of Paul in Ephesians 5.

Now, brothers, listen to me. This is important. Peter is afraid that in this time of crisis the elders will start to lord over, control, take over, or exercise authority (exousia) over the church. So he says, "Do not lord over the flock." These words "lord over" is the same in the Greek that Jesus Christ used in the opening passage that I read when he said, "The Gentiles lord it over (katakuriuo) those under them. The Gentiles have a hierarchy. There are some above others in authority. But it is not so among you." Peter repeats the Lord's word. "Do not lord over them!" "Do not be overlords over God's people!"

Now, brothers, none of us thinks that we lord over God's people. But let me tell you something: if your people are afraid of you, you are lording it over them! Your motive may good. But if your people feel controlled by you, you are lording it over them! Brothers, if your people feel that they have to get permission from you to make decisions in their private lives, then you are lording over them! Because, brothers, you are putting fear in the people's hearts. You are making them feel controlled. You are telling them what they can and cannot do in their personal lives, like voting, like visiting a meeting. Therefore you brothers are lording it over!! And if that is not what it means to lord over God's people, then you tell me what it means to lord over them!!!

God's servants, we in this room, are called to set the people of God free. This is our ministry. You can visit any of the churches that I work with. You will discover that they are not afraid of me. I do not tell them where they can visit. I do not tell them what they can and cannot do. I set them free to be under Jesus Christ who is their only Lord. And brothers, they respect me. And if I ask them to do something, I do not give them commands. I never command them to do anything. I, like Paul, beseech them. I ask them. And they listen to what I say. But brothers, I do not control them. They are not afraid of me. Consider this, brothers.

Now, I'm going to finish this quickly to make it complete. Peter writes another letter. 2 Peter. It deals with heresies in the churches in the Gentile world. (Scholars think he wrote this letter to the same churches he wrote to in 1 Peter.) Yet in light of the fact that heresies are infiltrating the churches, Peter never mentions elders. He predicts the coming of false teachers and prophets. But he never mentions elders or leaders as an antidote. Again, he writes only to the church.

JOHN AND JUDE TO THE CHURCHES

Now we come to the letters of John. Written by the apostle John. In John's day, dangerous doctrines were coming into the church. Some of them were doctrines that taught that Jesus Christ did not come in the flesh. John writes three letters. The first letter is to all the saints. Some have come with the doctrine that denied that Christ came in the flesh. John presents Jesus Christ in simplicity: He is light, He is love, and He is life. John never mentions leaders in his letter because the church was led by the church. In his second letter, he writes to the lady, the precious woman. In other words, John is writing to a church. He has seen the church as a girl, as a woman, as a bride, like Paul. In the third letter, we have a problem. John writes to the saints in Ephesus. They are being troubled. John sends workers to visit the churches. His own people. Apostles younger than John. He sent them to Ephesus. But there were some in the church that would not receive them.

John said, "There is a brother in the church who loves to have the preeminence. He believes God has called him to control God's people. He doesn't think he's controlling them. He thinks he is caring for them. But he is lording it over them. He will not receive me, and he will not receive the men I send. And he forbids the church to receive these workers also."

Brothers, we have not so learned Jesus Christ!

Jude wrote his letter at a time when the believers were falling prey to damnable heresies. Jude's main burden was for the Christians to contend for the purity of their original faith in Jesus Christ. Interestingly, in the face of these heresies, Jude never mentions elders or pastors.

HEBREWS AND JAMES

There is the book of Hebrews. It was probably written by Barnabas; we can't be sure. The Christians in the church that he is writing to, most of them are Jews. And many of them are being persecuted. So they are going back to their Jewish roots. Some of them have one foot in the church and one foot in the synagogue. Many of them are thinking of leaving the Christian faith because of the pressure.

This is a long letter. I think it is 13 chapters. And Barnabas (or whoever wrote it) never mentions elders. He talks to the church all the way through until he gets to the very last chapter. And then he says at the very end, "By the way, greet the elders. Greet them for me." At the end (Chapter 13), he also says, "Brothers and sisters, remember those who labored among you. Who taught you the faith. Imitate them." He's clearly talking about the apostles.

But as you read on, there is one verse. There is one line after he has written all these things to the church. He has written 13 chapters never mentioning elders. At the end of the 13th Chapter, there is one line where he says, "Brothers and sisters, obey those that shepherd you, who care for you, so that their work will not be difficult."

But brothers, listen to me. That word "obey" is an interesting word. When you get home, you check this out. But it is true. That word "obey" in the Greek language is not the normal word that is used for obey everywhere else as in "obey the king." It's not that word. The regular word for obey is *hupakuo*. It's used in such contexts as: "Obey the king." "Obey the judge." "Obey God." That word is not used here. Instead it is a different word. It is the Greek word *peitho*. It means "allow yourself to be persuaded by." "Let yourself be won by, persuaded by, the elders." It has this flavor. That when the older brothers speak in the meeting, or when the brothers come together to decide on things and the older brothers, the ones who serve the most, say something, listen to what they have to say. Esteem what they have to say.

Why? Because they serve the most. They are older and wiser. Not because they take the most. Not because they have a position. Or they have authority. But because they serve the most and are more mature in spiritual life.

He is not saying, "Obey them unconditionally." No! The Greek means "let yourself be persuaded by."

Okay, the last book that I have not mentioned is the book of James. He wrote it in about 49 A.D. shortly after Paul wrote Galatians. James is from Jerusalem. He was an apostle. He wrote a letter to the Jewish Christians all throughout Judea. The ones who were scattered throughout Palestine after Saul of Tarsus was persecuting the church.

Listen to me. The churches in Judea were having the following problems in 49 A.D.: They were turning toward the world. They were becoming worldly. They were loving the world. That's not all. The rich in the churches were mistreating the poor in the churches. The rich were taking the better seats, giving the poorer the low seats. They were also arguing a lot amongst themselves. There was strife in the churches.

So James writes, "To the elders." No! Just like Paul and just like Peter, James writes: "To the churches." All throughout the letter, James writes to the churches who are scattered everywhere in Judea. He writes to the twelve tribes, the Jews, who were meeting in the churches. Everything he says is to the brothers and the sisters.

And then in the last chapters he says, "Oh and by the way, when there are sick people who can't make the meeting, let the older brothers, let the elders, visit and pray for them." That's all he says about elders. He doesn't ask them to stop the worldliness nor blame them for it. The only thing he says is for the church to ask them for prayer when the saints are sick. That's all!

Finally we come to Patmos and the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation does not say anything about elders except that there are twenty-four elders in the heavenlies, and no one knows who they are.

CLOSING WORDS

My point is this, brothers: we have inherited a particular view of authority. We have inherited a mindset about leadership that does not come from Jesus Christ--which does not come from the New Testament. It comes from the Roman world! And we have baptized it, we have made it Christian, and we have promoted it. But it is not of God! And brothers, when you leave here today you are responsible. Now you know. For you have heard.

May we be liberators of God's people and not overlords. And here is the important thing, brothers: Many of you in this room may not see yourself as an overlord. But if your people do, then you are.